

Some of the more than 35 jumbo jets grounded at Gander Airport when U.S. airspace was closed in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

A Detour to Kindness: Delta 15 in Newfoundland

Story and photos by Peter Kaestner

It all began with a subtle turn halfway through Delta Flight 15's nine-hour flight from Frankfurt to Atlanta. At first, I didn't think too much of it, until I realized that we were going right, not left. "We have an indicator problem," the captain soon explained, "and we're diverting to Gander, Newfoundland, to have a mechanic take a look."

Uncertain about the plane's condition, we held our breaths for the landing. After a perfect touchdown, we taxied for several minutes to a remote part of the airport. Once we had parked, Captain Mike Sweeny announced that terrorists had attacked the United States. They had commandeered three commercial aircraft and flown two of them into the World Trade Center towers in New York and one into the Pentagon. He said U.S. airspace was closed and that he had no idea how long we would be on the ground.

Stunned, we soon formed small groups throughout the plane. People who had just flown six hours together without speaking to each other were now drawn together by a compelling, invisible force.

We sat patiently on the plane all day and all night. With little food and no entertainment, everyone talked quietly or slept. The next morning, we were greeted with a welcome breakfast of chocolate bars, potato chips and warm Pepsi Cola. Shortly afterward, there was great news—we were going to leave the aircraft! We drove across the huge Gander facility in school buses, past three dozen intercontinental jumbo jets sitting silently on the tarmac.

After stringent but polite security checks we wound our way through the north woods on a 45-minute drive to Lewisporte, a sparkling little town with immaculate homes, lovely gardens and quaint lawn ornaments proudly proclaiming that "The Smiths" lived there. As the yellow buses pulled up to St. Matthew's United Church, Pastor Lee Michelin and volunteers from his congregation greeted us. In the hall there were two televisions. More than 24 hours after it had happened, we finally saw the horrific images that had galvanized our nation and the world. The heinous acts, which had seemed so distant and unreal while we were on the plane, suddenly touched our hearts.

To deal with the tragedy, most people sought companionship. Four women, including one who was to be married on Saturday, formed a cohesive group we dubbed the "Four Musketeers." Several German businessmen formed another

Stranded for three days in Gander, passengers on Delta Flight 15 wait to reboard their flight to Atlanta.





The sanctuary of St. Matthew's United Church becomes a makeshift dorm, while generous volunteers from the Lewisporte church prepare and serve meals for the waylaid passengers of Delta Flight 15.



association, as did several U.S. military families with small and amazingly well-behaved children. Other passengers were connecting with our generous hosts. Several were invited to people's homes for tea and others were taken sightseeing. One couple on the plane knew someone who worked at the World Trade Center. They were offered an apartment for much-needed solitude. The volunteers gave us everything: toiletries, phones, Internet connections, hot showers, even the clothes off their backs! Since we only had our carry-on bags, almost everyone needed something.

At 5 p.m. sharp, an enthusiastic army of ad hoc waitresses served us dinner.

Realizing that no one had spoken during the meal, I got up. I tried to comfort the crowd by making some observations about what was likely ahead of us. I thanked the church, the volunteers and the community for their kindness. Then I told them that we had another reason to be proud Americans: The United States has the best neighbor in the world, Canada. Afterwards, people from several different nations thanked me for expressing their private feelings publicly.



Delta employees greet Flight 15 in Atlanta.

Thursday morning, I awoke before dawn and walked the mile or so to Woolfrey's Pond.

The warm water and cold night air combined to form a diaphanous fog that shrouded the surrounding black spruce forest like an Impressionist painting. The contrast between the death and destruction in the United States and the beauty and tranquility of the pond was overwhelming.

Friday dawned cold, gray and wet. As we ate another abundant breakfast, Pastor Michelin had a surprise—the buses were already coming to pick us up. There was emotional confusion as we left the wonderful people who had shared their town, church and hearts and prepared to return to our former lives. Back on the plane, one passenger gathered more than \$15,000 U.S. in pledges for a Lewisporte scholarship fund.

Delta Airlines employees greeted us in Atlanta waving flags and patriotic signs. But the nearly vacant Hartsfield Airport behind them poignantly reminded us that the United States would never be the same. We realized, too, that we would never be the same, touched as we had been by the extraordinary kindness of the citizens of Newfoundland. ■

The author is the consul general at the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City.